

DR. JOHN SHAW BILLINGS

DIRECTOR OF

THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

1896-1913



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## DR. JOHN SHAW BILLINGS

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Doctor Billings died at the New York Hospital March 11, 1913, after an absence from the Library of but eight days. By his death The New York Public Library loses its first Director, an organizer of unusual ability, and the staff loses a guide and friend.

Born in Switzerland county, Indiana, April 12, 1838, he obtained his early education in the local schools, graduated from Miami University at Oxford, Ohio, in 1857, and studied medicine at the Medical College of Ohio at Cincinnati where he received his degree of M.D. in 1860. The outbreak of the Civil war called him to the field and in the medical corps of the army he spent the next thirty-five years of his life.

He passed the examining board in September, 1861, received his appointment as assistant surgeon in November following and his commission on April 16, 1862. His promotion to the rank of captain and assistant surgeon came July 28, 1866, to major and surgeon December 2, 1876, to lieutenant-colonel and deputy surgeon-general June 16, 1894; on March 13, 1865, he received the brevet of lieutenant-colonel, U. S. A., for faithful and meritorious services during the war.

The early years of the war saw him in charge of hospitals in Washington, D. C., and West Philadelphia; in the summer of 1863 he was in the field with the Army of the Potomac, taking part in the battles of Chancellorsville and Gettysburg with the Fifth corps. The winter following was spent in hospital duty at David's and Bedloe's islands near New York City. In February, 1864, he was sent to the Ile A' Vache on the south coast of Hayti to bring back the negroes sent there from Virginia in the ill-fated Bernard Kock enterprise.

On his return he acted on a board of enrollment, then was made medical inspector to the Army of the Potomac, and in December, 1864, was ordered to the surgeon-general's office in Washington. Here he had charge of the organization of the Veteran Reserve Corps, of matters pertaining to contract physicians, and to all property and disbursing accounts until 1875. He was also in charge of the library of the surgeon-general's office until his appointment December 28, 1883, as curator of the army medical museum and library.

He spent his entire life in public service, undertaking and finishing

large enterprises, a quiet, unassuming, efficient worker. He gave his country five years of worthy service as medical officer in the time of civil war; he gave it thirty years of no less worthy service in time of peace.

He brought together in the national capital the largest collection of medical books in the world; he increased a thousandfold the usefulness of the collection by the epoch-making catalogue he conceived and brought forth. To this collection and to his intensive cultivation of it must be given no little credit for the progress of American medical science in the last generation and a half.

The creation and development of the Surgeon General's Library, the conception and printing of its "Index Catalogue," and the editing of the monthly "Index medicus" would have been tasks of sufficient size for an ordinary man. But the fertility of Doctor Billings' mind, the activity of his imagination, his eagerness and capacity for work, and the wideness of his sympathies led him into other and widely extended fields of usefulness. He made investigations in the principles of heating and ventilation and published the results in a text book that went through two editions and gave him as high a standing among ventilating engineers as he enjoyed already among physicians and surgeons. For the tenth and eleventh censuses he edited the vital statistics and thereby gained a place in the first rank of statisticians. As a lecturer on the history of medicine and on other medical topics he long had official connection with Johns Hopkins University; and at the University of Pennsylvania he served as a director of the hospital, as professor of hygiene, and as organizer and director of the laboratory of hygiene.

In the reorganization of the marine hospital service in 1870 and in the three active years spent as vice-president of the National Board of Health in 1879-1882 he rendered signal service in different fields. That his plans for the buildings of the Johns Hopkins Hospital were chosen by the trustees as the best submitted by the five invited competitors shows his skill as a designer and planner of hospital buildings, but greater evidence of his skill in choosing men and directing their activities is the organization of the hospital; he planned and supervised the buildings, organized the staff, and fixed the character of the institution and the work there done, setting a new standard in the systematic care and relief of the sick.

When he was retired from the army in 1895 at his own request after more than thirty years service he expected to end his days as professor of hygiene and director of the laboratory of hygiene at the University of Pennsylvania, posts he had held for some four years; other academic honors might have been his for the taking but he had put them aside. Just at this time, however, came the consolidation of the Astor and Lenox

libraries and the Tilden Trust. The position of director of the newly formed library was tendered to him and accepted, his appointment being dated January 15, 1896.

What he accomplished in The New York Public Library was done with such apparent ease and lack of effort, the results came with such a certainty, that often we fail to realize what a difficult task confronted him and how great were the efforts and the ability required to insure the attainments of the past seventeen years.

In those days both the Astor and the Lenox buildings closed at three or four o'clock in winter and at five or six during the rest of the year; each closed for three entire weeks in the summer. The combined staff numbered but forty people. Neither library had a complete general catalogue, or a shelf list. The new library had no provision for home use of books, this work being carried on by some dozen independent agencies.

Acting on the recommendation of Doctor Billings when he took active charge of the work in the summer of 1896 the Trustees enlarged the staff, put electric light in both buildings, extended the hours of closing to six o'clock throughout the year.

The combined collections contained about 350,000 volumes, classified by fixed location and incompletely catalogued. A system of relative classification was devised by Doctor Billings and under his direction applied to the entire collection. A uniform system of cataloguing was adopted for both buildings; for each a public catalogue was provided in dictionary form on standard size cards. With these catalogues were combined as rapidly as possible the catalogues previously existing, some of which were printed in book form, some in manuscript on standard cards, some in manuscript on large cards and some on small cards.

As executive officer of the Trustees he arranged a system of coöperation with the other large libraries of the city, a limitation of the field of each, a prevention of useless duplication of effort. With the place of The New York Public Library thus defined he threw his extensive experience in the book trade, his widespread and minute knowledge of books, and his boundless physical and mental energy into the work of extending and completing the collections of the library. Subscriptions to current periodicals were doubled and trebled, the contents of the important magazines were represented in the public catalogue by index cards, a coöperative indexing of the less popular magazines was begun in connection with four or five other large reference libraries.

The activities of the library were enlarged in many ways. Departments of maps, music, manuscripts, and prints were established and put on firm basis. A system of staff meetings was begun for informal discussion of questions of policy and administration, for improving the

acquaintance of the members of the staff, for increasing the loyalty and solidarity. A monthly "Bulletin" was started as a medium of information about the work of the institution, its growth and progress, the help it offered students and scholars.

The first five years of his life with The New York Public Library saw the staff well organized, the usefulness of the institution increased many fold, its collections more than doubled, their use intensified, new life and energy in every member of the staff.

His next achievement was the consolidation of the New York Free Circulating Library with its eleven branches, the establishment of the circulation department, the securing of the gift of \$5,200,00 from Mr. Carnegie for circulation branches, and the union of practically all the circulating systems in the city.

The future site of the headquarters of the library and the type of its central building were two questions of moment in the early days; settlement of the first depended mainly on the city government, but settlement of the second was due very largely to Doctor Billings. With the members of the executive committee of the Board of Trustees, Professor Ware of Columbia, and Col. Bernard R. Green, he drew the preliminary instructions for the architects in both competitions and exercised an important influence in the deliberations of the jury that considered the plans submitted.

The Library is fortunate enough to own to-day, through the kindness of Professor Ware, the bits of paper on which Doctor Billings one day in the spring of 1897 sketched roughly in pencil for Professor Ware, the professional adviser of the Trustees in this matter, his idea of what the building should be. In essence the plans here set down are those of the building as it stands to-day, the stack at the rear, main reading room on top, other rooms and offices grouped around the two courts. From the issue of preliminary notice to the competitors until the building was finished and opened fourteen years later the hand of Doctor Billings followed closely every development of plan on the architect's drawing board and every translation of it into the brick and mortar, iron and wood of the workman. To him more than to any other individual must be given credit for the plan and arrangement of the present building, this in no way detracting from the credit due to Messrs. Carrère and Hastings for their able services as architects.

In the later years of his life Doctor Billings found time to serve on the Committee of Fifty to investigate the liquor problem and as chairman of the subcommittee on pathological and physiological aspects to edit the results of its studies, in two volumes published in 1903. He was one of the American delegates to the international conference in London in 1896

on the subject of an international catalogue of scientific literature. He served as the professional adviser of the Trustees of the Peter Bent Brigham hospital in Boston. His opinion on vital statistics continued to be asked by statisticians, on hygiene and medicine by medical men and ventilating engineers, on library questions by librarians and library trustees, on problems of life in many phases by the host of people who had come to know or hear of him and to feel confidence in and respect for his judgment. A complete bibliography of his published books and papers would number over fifty titles.

His influence was great in the preliminary work that led to the establishment of the Carnegie Institution of Washington. The fostering of scientific research and investigation — the study of "science" in its widest and most comprehensive meaning — had long been a favorite idea with him, and his part in the increase of human knowledge in this way and by this institution is an achievement that should put him high in the ranks of men who have served humanity.

He was president of the New York Library Club and of the American Library Association; during his presidency of the latter, and at his suggestion, Mr. Carnegie gave the \$100,000 endowment for the work of the A. L. A. Publishing board. He attended the conference of the American librarians at Philadelphia in 1876 and wrote the chapter on medical libraries in the centennial report on American libraries issued by the Bureau of Education. He had been president of the Philosophical Society of Washington, of the American Public Health Association, of the Congress of American Physicians and Surgeons, vice-president of the American Statistical Association, treasurer of the National Academy of Sciences, an active or honorary member of over forty scientific and learned societies. He was a member of the executive committee of the Carnegie Institution of Washington from the beginning and from 1903 until his death served as Chairman of the board of trustees.

His degree of A.B. came from Miami University at Oxford, Ohio, in 1857, and of M.D. from the Medical College of Ohio in 1860. He received the degree of A.M. from Miami University in 1860. Honorary degrees of M.D. came to him from Munich and Dublin; of D.D. from Budapest; of LL.D. from Edinburgh, Harvard, Yale, and Johns Hopkins; of D.C.L. from Oxford; the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland and the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland made him an honorary Fellow.

He was a large man, physically and mentally. His knowledge of books was of amazing range, minuteness, and accuracy. Little that he read — and he read constantly — passed from his memory, whether it was reading in poetry, fiction, science, history, art, astrology, travel, the realm of fancy or letters or facts. It was always ready at hand, and even to

those who knew him well was a source of never ending wonder. Two novels a day were for years a part of his mental food, "the modern novel being the best soporific known" being one of his favorite comments.

His capacity for work was far beyond the average and whatever he undertook was done with a thoroughness and finality that left little or nothing for his follower. His mind dealt in large quantities. But this very characteristic quality by no means shut him out from the appreciation of small things or made him forgetful of detail; his perspective was long but he knew well the importance of the immediate foreground. In the early days of The New York Public Library he knew the name, character, and qualifications of every member of the staff, whether boy or department head. In later years the staff grew so rapidly and changed so frequently that newer members were often but names to him, though to the end he had a surprisingly intimate and accurate acquaintance with both names and persons.

He was a severe and exacting leader, insistent on his own ideals, a tireless worker, admirably capable of getting work done by others. He came to decisions quickly and was not easily moved from a position once taken. His poise and fortitude are a lasting inspiration for his fellow workers and to those privileged to get behind his characteristic reserve were shown traits that endeared the man and commanded respect for his achievements.

As stated above he was at his desk in the Library until Monday, March 3, eight days before his death on the 11th. His body was taken to Washington on Thursday, March 13, and after services at St. John's church, Georgetown, was buried at Arlington cemetery on the morning of Friday, the 14th.

The honorary pall bearers were Dr. S. Weir Mitchell; Dr. Charles D. Walcott, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution; Hon. Elihu Root, United States senator from New York; Dr. R. S. Woodward, President of the Carnegie Institution of Washington; Dr. W. S. Halsted of Johns Hopkins; Hon. John L. Cadwalader and Mr. Frederic R. Halsey, of the Library Trustees; and Mr. Edwin H. Anderson, Assistant Director.

Six officers from the Surgeon General's office represented the medical corps, and Miss Hasse, Miss Leffingwell, Miss Sauer, and Messrs. Lockwood, Eames, Weitenkampf, and Lydenberg the Library staff.

The actual pall bearers were three artillery sergeants and three corporals, and the casket, draped with the national colors, was taken on an artillery caisson from church to cemetery and lowered into the grave as "taps" were sounded.

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